



KEVIN BUBRISKI

REVIEW

## A Record of Old Kashgar

*The Uyghur city in Xinjiang has been disrupted by outside forces through history — of which Chinese rebuilding is the latest change. A book of images and stories records what it once was.*

HENRYK SZADZIEWSKI — MAY 9, 2024

XINJIANG



In the summer of 1994, I arrived on the streets of Kashgar's Old City, at the edge of the Tarim Basin region in southern Xinjiang, China's far west near its border with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. I was a newly recruited English teacher for the UK's Voluntary Service Overseas, with a degree in Modern Chinese Studies. Over the three years I would spend in Kashgar, the importance of the city to the Uyghur people who called it home, and its unique identity within China, became clear to me. Back then, Kashgar was still unmistakably a Uyghur city first, and a Chinese city second: its homes, businesses, schools and places of worship were filled with everyday life that carried the knowledge of the past into an irrepressible present and uncertain future.

The history of Kashgar and its Old City stretches over 2000 years, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the most recent in a long line of its occupiers. Due to its distinctive geographical location, Kashgar has witnessed various kingdoms, overseen power struggles among empires, and embraced diverse religious traditions including Manichaeism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Nestorianism. When Islam made its way into China via Kashgar, the city was a fusion of Chinese, Persian, Turkic and Indian influences. Over centuries, as the Silk Road flourished, Kashgar evolved into a hub of cultural exchange, trade and religious learning. Beyond its role as a crossroads of civilizations, Kashgar is central to Uyghur culture, a space integral to the identity of the Uyghur people. The People's Liberation



Army became intertwined with this history and culture when it entered the city in 1949.


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Like previous outsiders, functionaries of the Chinese state are feverishly attempting to score a mark of their permanence onto the fabric of the city. For these latest colonizers, indelibility is expressed by demolishing the Old City and building a “modern” Kashgar in the image of the rest of China, cleansed of its Uyghurness and easier to control. That Uyghurs have not been grateful enough for this gift of development has only led to increasing repression, including a network of camps, prisons and surveillance across Xinjiang in recent years.

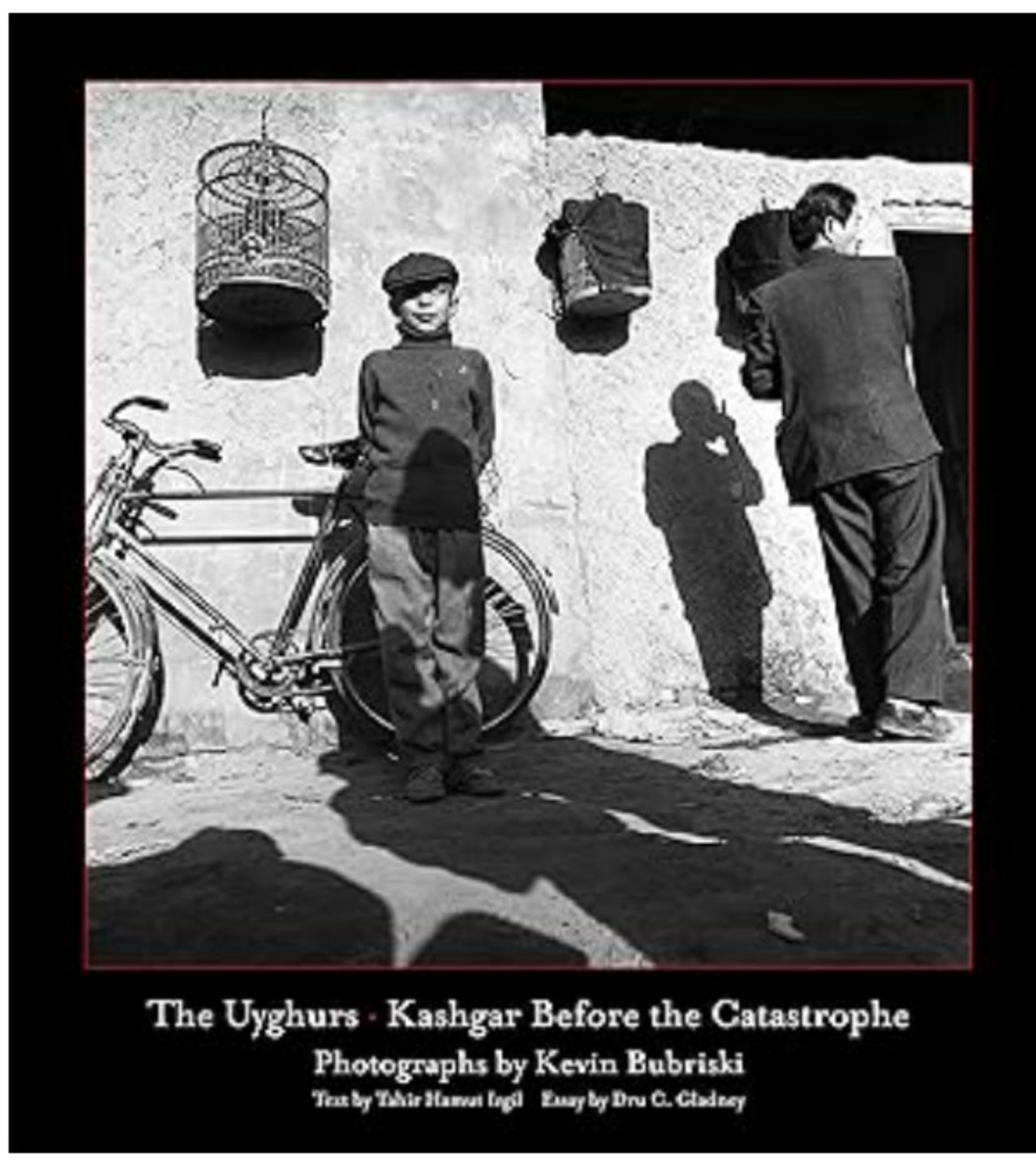
The demolition of Kashgar’s Old City has taken place for decades under the CCP. Its original 35-foot-high city walls were destroyed in the 1980s, and the moat surrounding it was paved over to create a ring road, with a main street running through the center as a simulacra of the old town. In 2001, 2,500 Uyghurs were relocated during a redevelopment of the area around Id Kah Mosque, Kashgar’s main place of worship. Then in February 2009, officials began carrying out a large-scale [demolition](#) as part of a “residents resettlement project” aimed at moving 220,000 Uyghurs (approximately half of Kashgar’s population) to other parts of the city.



Id Kah Mosque, Kashgar, 1998 (Kevin Bubriski)

A target was set to demolish 85% of the eight square kilometers that comprised the Old City. Homes, businesses and community spaces were wrecked, rebuilt and exploited for tourism, as outlined in a [report](#)  by the Uyghur Human Rights Project, where I work. Those who were able to take advantage of the opportunities included outside investors, such as the Beijing-based steel company Zhongkun. Those Uyghurs who [remained](#) were in the service of the tourism industry as dancers, servers and living exhibits. In April 2024, new regulations ironically [proposed](#) to “protect the traditional neighborhood with its distinctive Uygur [sic] architecture and prevent it from being excessively commercialized.”





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*The Uyghurs: Kashgar before the Catastrophe* (2023) is an opportunity to step back into that time before the 2009 demolitions, to the 1990s when I was first living there. In 1998, the American photographer Kevin Bubriski visited Kashgar, resulting in this remarkable book of 126 photographs, paired with text by the Uyghur poet Tahir Hamut Izgil. It is a glimpse from another passerby in the long arc of Kashgar’s past.

Holding the book is an aesthetic pleasure. Bubriski’s photographs are divided into four portfolios: Id-Kah Mosque, Afaq Khoja Mausoleum, and the People’s Square; the streets and alleyways of the Old City; Kashgar’s Bazaars; and its students and institutes of learning. The images are predominantly black and white, but each portfolio is book-ended by color images. The accompanying text is bilingual, translated from the Uyghur into English by the anonymous “M.A.” and Xinjiang scholar Darren Byler. This not only highlights the original composition in Uyghur, but also underscores that the book is about knowledge belonging to Uyghurs.

In the first portfolio, Bubriski’s images contrast two distinctly Uyghur spaces that survived the demolitions, the Id Kah Mosque and Afaq Khoja Mausoleum, against the intrusion of the People’s Square with its Mao Zedong statue, erected during the Cultural Revolution. Tahir explains how the statue is a frequent target of jokes among Kashgaris, and the images reflect this irreverence: one shows a young boy imitating the outstretched-arm pose of Mao while staring into the lens. Elsewhere, Bubriski captures the Islamic history of Kashgar’s people and buildings in piercing detail, as bearded Uyghur men in *chapan* coats and *tumaq* hats congregate outside Id Kah Mosque.



People’s Square, Kashgar, 1998 (Kevin Bubriski)

Next, Bubriski presents the Old City before the demolitions. These images of intimate Uyghur spaces, a refuge from the forces of sinicization, are of places forever lost. Children, elders, traders and workers occupy the foreground of courtyards and alleyways. To outsiders, Kashgar’s Old City was a maze, yet in the minds of its residents, the passageways were clearly mapped as places of family, business, play and learning. Here, Tahir shares a fitting Kashgar folk song:

“

Our house is by the fountainhead,  
Can you find it if you go?  
Locked from the inside,  
Can you find it if you stretch your hand?

”

Tahir’s text opens the third portfolio by explaining the economic, social and cultural importance of Kashgar’s extensive bazaars. Along with home and mosque, bazaars are where

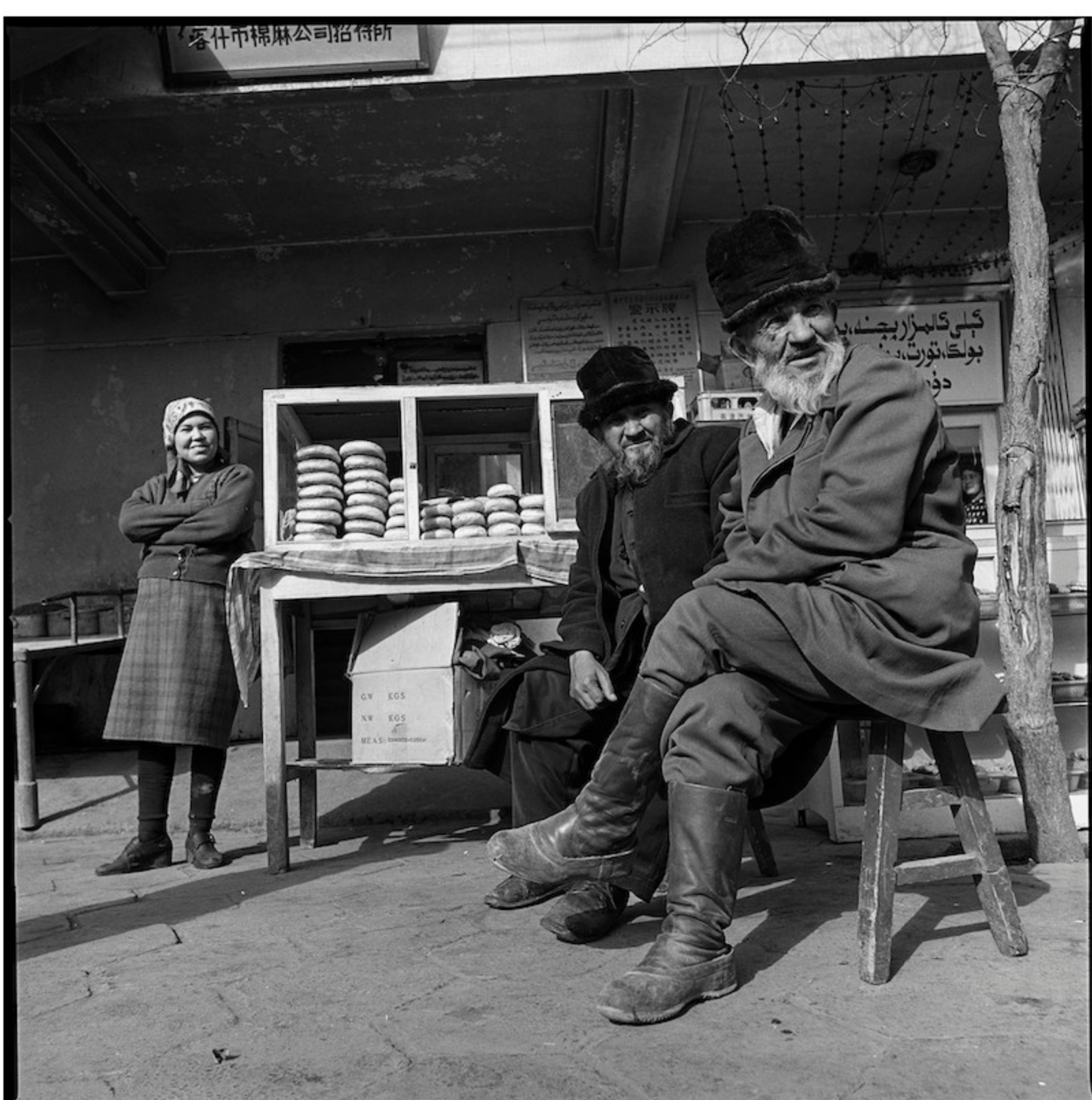


“[w]earing new clothes, with money in their pockets, people come in high spirits seeking happiness. They encounter new scenes they have never experienced before and enjoy the plethora of food while meeting new friends.” Bubriski’s photographs capture this spirit with images of families sharing meals in restaurants, and of a vast array of goods for sale, including furniture, birds, musical instruments, copperware and carpets.

The final section showcases students and educational institutions, including Kashgar Teachers College. When Bubriski visited, Uyghur students could receive an education in their own language; teachers had not yet been forced into the absurdity of teaching them in Mandarin. Tahir reminds us of the historical contributions of Kashgar to world knowledge (such as those of 11th century philosopher Yusuf Khas Hajib and lexicographer Mahmud al-Kashgari), as well as the innovative pedagogies of educational reformers in the early 20th century, who oversaw a shift toward science-based education from one centered on religion. This change instigated a surge in national awareness in which “concepts like independence, freedom, and democracy began to take root in people’s hearts.” Bubriski’s photography shows us young scholars in the midst of another educational transition — one built on socialist, rather than nationalist, values.

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The book also includes an essay by the anthropologist Dru C. Gladney, who passed away a year before its publication. This offers a lucid overview of Kashgar’s long history, full of learning, trade, politics, languages, religion and ambition. Gladney terms it “a city with a long and complicated history, located somewhere between mountain and steppe, oasis and desert, East and West.” He also ties its conquerors of the past to those of today. That Kashgar has become a junction in Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative — a policy hitched to the promotion of a Chinese vision of globalism — emphasizes how pivotal the city has been in transnational flows of trade, people and ideas through time. Gladney was a friend to scholars and activists engaged in the Uyghur experience, and his passing is a loss to scholarship.



Selling naan on the street, Kashgar, 1998 (Kevin Bubriski)

*The Uyghurs* joins a number of photography books about Uyghurs and their homeland published outside of China, including [Living Shrines of Uyghur China](#) (2013) by Lisa Ross, Carolyn Drake’s [Wild Pigeon](#) (2014), and [Dust](#) (2021) by Patrick Wack. All of these books capture aspects of the Uyghur people’s cultural and epistemological loss, but Bubriski’s focus on one city is unique. (Other works on Kashgar specifically include Michael Dillon’s [Xinjiang and the Expansion of Chinese Communist Power](#) (2014), the 2008 travel book [Kashgar](#), and a variety of Uyghur-language works by authors including Abdukerim Rahman and Adil Muhemmet.)



Bubriski's photos and Tahir's words are a poignant tribute to a time, a place and a people. While the book is a document of what has been lost, it is also a record of a historical disruption, and a remembrance for the future. The study of history looks beyond mere colonial contact to understand the occupied spaces themselves. The CCP's arrival in Kashgar follows that of Mongols, Manchus and a cast of other colonizers. Yet the city of Kashgar will outlast that, as it did the Mongols and the Manchus.

I grew up in the UK, the child of Polish parents who had escaped the Nazis and the Soviets. In the depths of communist rule over Poland during the 1980s, my mother took me on a trip to Warsaw's Old Town square. She explained that the Nazis had leveled it in WWII, when she was a child, but that Poles rebuilt the space from memory and images, using as much of the old materials as possible — often improving on the original buildings.

The next time I returned to Poland, the communists had gone, but the rebuilt square remained. ■

*All images from [The Uyghurs: Kashgar before the Catastrophe](#), courtesy of George F. Thompson Publishing.*

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Henryk Szadziewski is Director of Research at the [Uyghur Human Rights Project](#), a research-based advocacy organization in Washington, D.C. He is also an affiliate at the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where he earned a PhD in Geography. He is author of articles for publications including *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Conversation*, *Asia Times* and *OpenDemocracy*.